

DEC 21 1927

# THE WILSON BULLETIN

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF ORNITHOLOGY

Published by the Wilson Ornithological Club

---

Vol. XXXIX. (Old Series) No. 4

December, 1927

---

Vol. XXXIV (New Series) Whole Number 141

---

## DOWN BIRD ISLAND WAY

BY J. J. CARROLL

Bird Island, lying in Laguna de la Madre off the Texas coast, is in springtime a spot of never failing interest to the ornithologist no matter with what frequency he may visit it. This island is not of very easy access because of the shallow waters of the Laguna. On this account a boat of light draft is required—a craft which is really little more than a skiff equipped with an out-board motor. Motive power of this sort is more or less uncertain in its functioning and one depending on it faces the possibility of completing the voyage with oars. But neither this prospect nor the unsparing rays of the summer sun has potency to diminish the bird student's enthusiasm once he is on his way.

On the morning of June 17, 1926, the sun was beaming down in its usual ardent fashion as four of us, including the boy operating the motor, set out from Flour Bluff, Bird Island, eighteen or twenty miles to the south, being our goal. My two other companions were L. D. Garrison, a lumberman of Corpus Christi, and his son Donald. Neither of these gentlemen shared my ornithological enthusiasm, their incentive being a combination of curiosity to see what bird life on the island was like and a desire for a day's outing. They were mildly tolerant of my consuming interest in the birds.

Hardly had we got under way when things of interest began to come under our observation. Standing in the shallow water with long necks outstretched, several Ward's Herons eyed us suspiciously as we glided by. A few Least Terns were making their swallow-like descents, skimming gracefully over the surface of the water. It was only near Flour Bluff that we saw these beautiful little terns. Presently we passed a flock of twenty or thirty Mexican Cormorants, and five or six Brown Pelicans sailed by with quiet dignity. A little way out the Caspian and Royal Terns began to appear in considerable numbers as did also the Laughing Gulls. They hovered over the

schools of small fish that literally swarm in the shallow waters of the Laguna. In nearly any direction we might see a company of these gyrating fishermen. Frequently one would plunge into the water to come up with a luckless fish held crosswise in his beak. His quarry thus captured the long flight to the island would begin, twelve or fifteen miles away. When on the way to their nests with food for the young, they would fly only a foot or so above the water. Often a Laughing Gull would fly along directly over and not far above the boat, evidently mistaking us for fishermen and looking forward to a feast off refuse.



Young of the Brown Pelican. Bird Island, June 17, 1926

Presently came in sight three Man O'War Birds soaring majestically on their long narrow wings. Later we were to see one of these peregrine buccaneers harry a tern till in desperation it dropped its precious fish which the marauder quickly pounced upon.

As the day wore on the heat grew more pitiless. There was no wind. Scarcely a ripple disturbed the surface of the water. On our left the glistening white sand-dunes on Padre Island appeared entirely detached and dancing in mid-air. But Bird Island was at last in sight. Within a short time we could see faintly the glint of flashing white wings. As we drew gradually nearer the circling birds became more and more distinct, until finally it became evident that the myriad nesting sea-birds one usually finds on this island were awaiting us. But in reality they did not await us; they came to meet us, a milling, scolding throng. The boat's bottom grated on the sand some fifteen or

twenty feet from the island's beach, and Grasflex in hand I lost no time in leaping overboard to wade the rest of the way. We landed near the south end of the island where its level above high tide is a matter of inches. At this point there is no vegetation of any kind—just the bare sand and shell.

The Garrisons were out with me and we quickly found ourselves in the midst of a Black Skimmer nesting area. The nests were numerous, situated only a little way apart, well defined cavities scooped out of the sand, with no lining of any sort. They contained from one to five handsomely marked eggs, the ground color being a creamy white to buff, spotted or boldly splotched with varying shades of brown. The marking in most cases was of large pattern. There were some hundreds of nests, but I made no effort to make anything like a definite count.

No young were found which I regretted because there are few fledglings which interest me more than immature Black Skimmers. Later in the summer, July, I found two nesting colonies of these birds on Matagorda Peninsula some hundred and twenty-five or fifty miles up the gulf coast from Bird Island. A few of the nests in these colonies contained eggs apparently fresh even at that date. Most of the nests, however, held young birds varying in age from newly hatched to a size nearly ready to take flight. I spent sometime observing them. When an intruder appears near the nesting grounds the parent birds feign injury and inability to fly, very much after the manner of the Mourning Dove. They lie on the ground fluttering and going through all sorts of antics in an effort to decoy the supposed enemy away from the eggs or young. Another curious thing I have noticed with regard to these birds is their determination to compel their young to lie flat on the sand motionless and unblinking, when an intruder is about. If a young bird takes fright and scuttles across the sand an adult, whether the parent I do not know, will fly in pursuit and with his bill knock him heels over head, or even pick him up and fly a little way before dropping him. Then the youngster stretches out flat on the sand, moving not a muscle, and imagines himself hidden. But their bright eyes remain open as a number of pictures I have made will testify. The half grown birds are inclined to go out into the water and swim about near the shore line.

Leaving the Skimmer colony we proceeded toward the north end of the island escorted by a hostile convoy of countless Laughing Gulls, Caspian and Royal Terns and the yet indignant Black Skimmers. The



air was teeming with birds, all vociferously and doubtless profanely expressing their disapproval of our presence.

The next nesting area we encountered was occupied by Caspian Terns. They were situated on higher ground and at this point there was some sparse vegetation. This species is apparently not so inclined to nest on bare spots as is the Royal Tern. Most of the nests contained two eggs or young, while a few contained only one. The nests were more or less concealed in the weeds and boasted some lining. The eggs are attractive in appearance—a background of buff marked with specks, spots and scrawls of brownish with often an underlying grayish



Bank of Royal Terns. Bird Island, May 15, 1927

hue. The adult birds fiercely resented our intrusion and were warlike in their remonstrance.

Near the center of the island was located an enormous colony of Laughing Gulls. Here there grew a sort of beach grass and a succulent weed. The nests were to some extent hidden and were lined with grass and weeds. The nests being only a few inches apart, we were compelled to walk with the greatest care to prevent stepping on them. They contained two or three eggs or young. The eggs average much darker than the tern eggs, the background brownish or dark buffy with darker markings in the shape of spots and blotches. Of course, as is the case of most gull eggs, many specimens varied from the average. These little gulls are curious looking striped and mottled chaps and



Laughing Gulls standing near their nests



Reddish Egret leaving nest in the cactus

have the habit of thrusting their heads under a bit of grass or weed and feeling perfectly secure.

The next homesite we invaded was occupied by the graceful Louisiana Heron. Here we found the first real nests. They were well constructed of twigs and sticks, laid on the grass and weeds a foot or so above the ground. The nests contained from two to four eggs or young, the latter varying in age from freshly hatched to nearly fully fledged. The adult bird manifested a lively interest in our presence, but were nothing like so resentful as the terns, gulls, and skimmers. Leaving their nests they would fly only a short distance away and eye us inquiringly. Not all of these herons were nesting together. They were divided into several groups, never mingling with other species of birds.

What I have said concerning this heron will apply pretty well to the seventy-five or one hundred pairs of Reddish Egrets we found nesting on the island, except that the egrets did not accept the invasion with the Louisiana Herons' complacency. Their displeasure was expressed chiefly by the standing on end of every neck feather and the erection of the crest which gives them a ferocious aspect. The nests of the egrets were of about the same construction as the herons and similarly located. We saw one adult egret in the white phase and only a single white immature bird.

The explorations I have just described were not made in quietude by any means. Notwithstanding we were no longer in the immediate vicinity of their nests, the gulls, terns and a few skimmers accompanied us and by their shrill incessant cries demonstrated their continued ill-will. While hundreds had returned to their nests the air above our heads was still filled with angry birds.

We were now approaching the northern end of the island where grew the prickly pear cactus, spreading in clumps over a considerable area. Some of these cacti reached a height of four or five feet and many of the clusters would measure fifteen or twenty feet in diameter.

Here we found first the Brown Pelican, several hundreds of pairs, and then the Ward's Heron, perhaps one hundred nests. Many of the pelicans' nests were built up in the cactus—great thick affairs made of sticks both large and small, lined with weeds. Others were built on the ground sometimes not more than two feet apart. Those on the ground in many cases were twelve or fifteen inches in height, dirt entering largely into their composition. Apparently they were used from





Part of the Colony of Brown Pelicans



Royal Terns and Cabot's Terns, at nests

year to year, being repaired and augmented each spring. There was a remarkable difference in the nesting time of these birds. Nests with incomplete complements of eggs were found and right alongside would be young nearly as large as the adult birds. Not infrequently a young pelican would be nearly twice the size of his nest mates. The decaying fish lying all around made this nesting area particularly ill-smelling. As we approached large numbers of half-fledged birds would gather in groups and waddle slowly away while the old birds looked on with an air of benevolence and kindly interest. No other bird within my knowledge can approach the pelican for grave dignity. As the young birds were awkward and none too sure of foot at best it was amusing to watch the difficulties into which they would fall when attempting to hasten away from us. One would stumble over the uneven ground and for support would throw a wing over the shoulder of his neighbor, who, losing his balance because of the added weight would reach frantically for the next bird and so on until the whole company was in confusion. When they saw that escape by flight was impossible they would fall back upon their last defense which is a disgusting performance. With much retching and contortion and gaping of their enormous mouths—but I will spare you the details. It is sufficient to say that much fishing on the part of their respective parents thereby went for naught.

A little farther north we found the Ward's Heron. Their nests were wide and thick platforms of sticks—some of them as thick as one's wrist—and represented much labor. Many of them contained four or five eggs of the usual bluish green color, while others contained young of all ages, from chicks hardly dry to practically full fledged birds. One of them was so large that I felt sure he would fly if sufficiently urged, and to satisfy myself on that point I gave chase. He made no effort to fly and his attempts to co-ordinate the movement of his long awkward legs was almost a failure. Finally he got under way toward the beach with me in close pursuit, when he slipped and began to skid in such piteous fashion that I had not the heart to tantalize him further. The nesting time of the Ward's Heron covers considerable time, as I have seen their eggs from February to July.

Between the cactus and the shell and sand beach was found a large colony of Royal Terns and they met us with a vociferous challenge. The nests were but slight depressions with no lining of any sort. They were located near together and in nearly all instances contained but a single egg.





Reddish Egret, in white phase, at nest in the cactus



Black Skimmers resting at the edge of the water

The eggs of this species average lighter in background color than those of the Caspian Tern, being usually yellowish white, the markings being of several shades of brown distributed pretty well over the entire egg, small dots, large spots and splotches. Hundreds of young Royal Terns were gathered together near the edge of the water, the old birds hovering over them continuously.

Nearby we found a small colony of Cabot's Terns. One nest, if we may so designate a shallow hollow in the sand, contained a young bird. The others contained one egg each, and beautiful eggs they were. The background varied from creamy white to buff. The markings were small and large spots and scrawls of dark brown. They were very near together and the efforts at nest making had been negligible. At a short distance was a small colony of Black Skimmers but not more than a dozen nests.

One Great-tailed Grackle's nest containing three eggs was found in the top of some weeds—the only land birds we saw.

I had made a good many pictures of nests, eggs, young birds and some adults and as I had not had much time in many years to devote to bird study I was having a thoroughly delightful experience. The Garrisons lent their aid in every way possible and I was hopeful that I might proselyte them into the ornithologists' fold. I was delighted therefore to have a letter from Mr. Garrison later asking where he might procure some books on birds, as the deadly virus had done its work.

We returned to the boat tired but happy and I have many a picture to remind me of one of the most enjoyable experiences I have ever had.

---

Since the foregoing was written it has again been my pleasure to visit Bird Island, Mr. Garrison being my companion as before. Our trip was made earlier this year (1927), May 14, and as we found conditions in some respects different I have thought it might be of interest to record them.

Long before we reached the island I caught an occasional glimpse of the bright sun's rays falling on a huge snowy form with black tipped wings, flying about in majestic circles—the White Pelican. While others had found it nesting there on rare occasions the experience was new to me. In fact the boatman assured me that we would find no nests but I was hopeful nevertheless. The winged hosts came out to hurl the usual maledictions—gulls, terns, and skimmers. It was



Nest and Eggs of Brown Pelican  
Bird Island, June 17, 1926



Nest and Eggs of Brown Pelican  
Bird Island, June 17, 1926



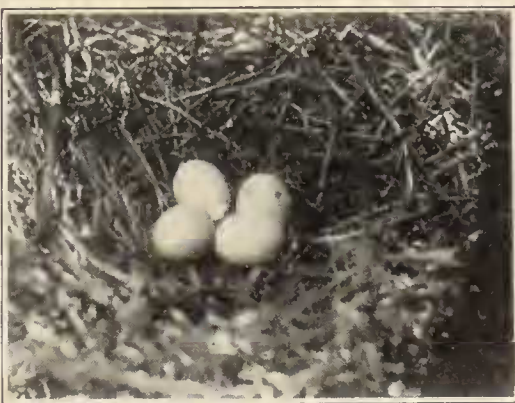
Nest and Eggs of Ward's Heron  
Bird Island, June 17, 1926



Nest and Eggs of Louisiana Heron  
Bird Island, June 17, 1926



Nest and Eggs of Laughing Gull  
Bird Island, June 17, 1926



Nest and Eggs of Reddish Egret  
Bird Island, June 17, 1926



immediately evident that changes had taken place. The Brown Pelicans had abandoned their old quarters in the cactus and had established two large rookeries in entirely new locations, both being but a few steps from the water's edge on the open shell beach. The nests were arranged in long lines paralleling the shore in ranks of five or six, set near together, great heaps of weeds and sticks. Most of the nests contained three or four quite naked young who gaped and snapped at us as we passed. Only a few contained eggs. We were astonished at the great number of adult birds lying about dead.

The Ward's Herons, too, had moved to a new location and seemed greatly reduced in numbers. Nearly all nests contained young one-half to two-thirds grown.

The Reddish Egrets apparently had increased several fold and many of the nests were built flat on the ground. Nearly all nests



Eggs of the Black Skimmer  
Bird Island, June 17, 1926



Young of Black Skimmer, "hiding"  
Matagorda Island, July, 1926

contained eggs, a few holding young just hatched. One beautiful white one was found and agreeably posed for its portrait over its nest in the cactus.

The Louisiana Heron appeared to be no better than holding its own if indeed it was doing that. All nests contained eggs. Nesting conditions were unchanged.

The Laughing Gull was more widely dispersed, the grass and weeds in every direction being filled with their nests, all containing eggs. It was difficult to walk without stepping into a nest.

The Caspian Terns were found in more open situations than formerly and were divided into a number of widely separated colonies. Only a few nests contained newly hatched young and not a few nests held three eggs.

The Cabot's Tern was found occupying the identical spot used last year. Many hundred of eggs but no young.

The Royal Tern was more widely scattered, several colonies being found. In one case their eggs were lying within the limits of a Cabot rookery. No young.

Two nests of Black-crowned Night Heron were in the cactus, which the birds hurriedly left as we approached. They contained eggs. None of this species was found here last year.

The White Pelicans, seventy-five or one hundred in number, had all left the island and presented a beautiful picture as they swam in close formation only a short distance from shore. Presently we saw one leave the water and fly over and drop down into the cactus near the center of the island. We hurried to the spot and were delighted to find five nests, each containing one egg, and a large number ready for eggs. The nests were not nearly so elaborate as those of the Brown Pelican, being a mere depression in the sand with a handful of small sticks for lining. My information had always been that this species nested earlier than the Brown Pelican.

The Black Skimmers had just begun house-keeping only a few nests being found. Near one of their areas we found several nests of the Gull-billed Tern, another species not found last year. Its nest was a slight depression thinly lined with small twigs, each nest containing two eggs.

At a considerable distance we saw three white birds flying which might have been Snowy Egrets, Little Blue Herons or Reddish Egrets. As the white phase of the latter is so rare I should think it probable that they were assignable to one of the two first-named species, but they were too far away for identification. I had never before seen either a Snowy Egret or Little Blue Heron on the island.

A few Great-tailed Grackles were found as usual, and two dirty yellowish progeny of the Black Vulture hissed at us from their home under the cactus.

Two Mottled Ducks were flying around and an Avocet waded in the water near shore showing no indication of having a nest.

Last year none of the terns smashed their eggs as we approached, but this time all three species resorted to this peculiar and rather heroic defense—only a few however.

HOUSTON, TEXAS.